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THURSTON COUNTY HISTORICAL JOURNAL

An Olympia Urban Legend

Changes in Thurston County's Bird Populations During the Past Forty Years

The Chambers Black Heart Cherry Tree: A Northwest Icon

Water, Woods & Prairies: A Thurston County History Book **$5.00**

THURSTON COUNTY HISTORICAL JOURNAL

The *Thurston County Historical Journal* is dedicated to recording and celebrating the history of Thurston County.
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Submission Guidelines

The Journal *welcomes factual articles dealing with any aspect of Thurston County history. Please contact the editor before submitting an article to determine its suitability for publication. Articles on previously unexplored topics, new interpretations of well-known topics, and personal recollections are preferred. Articles may range in length from 100 words to 10,000 words, and should include source notes and suggested illustrations.*

Submitted articles will be reviewed by the editorial committee and, if chosen for publication, will be fact-checked and may be edited for length and content. The Journal *regrets that authors cannot be monetarily compensated, but they will gain the gratitude of readers and the historical community for their contributions to and appreciation of local history.*

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***Top left**: Glaucous-Winged Gull. Photograph by Alan Schmierer.*

***Top right**: Anna's Hummingbird. Photograph by Nate Gowan, Great Backyard Bird Count; used with permission of the National Audubon Society.*

***Bottom left**: Bald Eagle. Photograph by Daniel Joppich, Audubon Photography Awards; used with permission of the National Audubon Society.*

***Bottom right**: Barrow's Goldeneyes. Photograph courtesy of Yellowstone National Park Service.*

See article on page 17.

An Olympia Urban Legend

James S. Hannum, M.D.

Throughout recorded history, underground tunnels have been a fascinating part of popular culture. The reported use of such tunnels has ranged from the mundane to highly secret, covert activities. In the southern part of Puget Sound, several tunnels have been the subject of discussion. Some actually do exist. The presence of others, although mentioned now and then, seem impossible to verify.

Documented Thurston County Tunnels

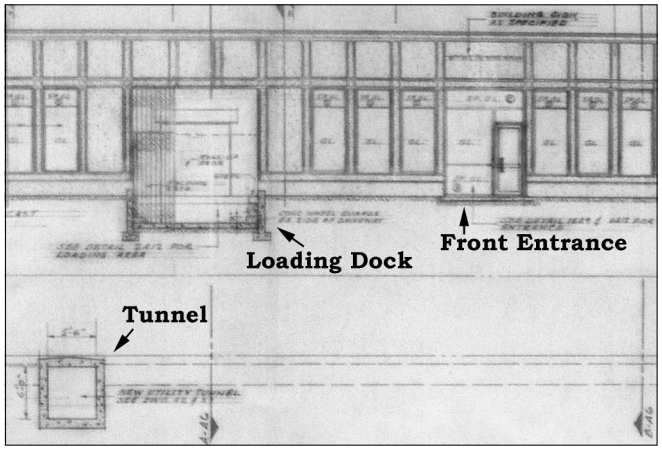
Among the mundane is the system of underground tunnels at The Evergreen State College. These passages are used as conduits for utilities and can accommodate the workers who maintain those utilities. An image of one of these tunnels was posted April 18, 2015 to the online website Imgur.[1] The same website presented a map of the tunnels on August 18, 2015.[2]

A tunnel connects the lowest level of the Washington State Archives to the Highways-Licensing Building, located east of the archives. The passage spans the entire east-west dimension of the archives building and runs almost directly east, ending at the Highways-Licensing Building. Within the archives, it is accessed through a hatch on the floor of the lowest level. This tunnel was constructed during the Cold War (which lasted from approximately 1947 to 1991). Benjamin Helle, Research Archivist at the Washington State Archives, provided a blueprint showing the front elevation of the Archives Building. Part of that image is seen in Figure 1. Figure 2 is a recent photograph taken by Helle within the tunnel. He adds that an additional tunnel exists between the Pritchard Building (a previous location for the Washington State Library) and the Legislative Building.

Another system of tunnels can be found in Tumwater. Paul Knight, formerly a brewmaster for the Olympia Brewing Company, recalls[3] that most buildings of the post-Prohibition brewery complex are connected by an extensive network of underground passages.

Undocumented Olympia Tunnels

Now we will consider other tunnels, the existence of which cannot readily be documented. Relevant background information concerning the Urban Onion Restaurant includes the fact that the eatery closed in 2015 after operating for several decades in Olympia's Olympian Hotel, at 116 Legion Way SE. The website *reddit* hosts a subred-



***Top**: Figure 1. Front Elevation, Construction Blueprint for Archives Building, DES/General Administration Department, Engineering and Architectural Files, Washington State Archives, Archives Building, Olympia.*

***Bottom**: Figure 2. Tunnel from Archives Building to Highways Licensing Building. Photograph by Benjamin Helle, Research Archivist, Washington State Archives.*

dit labelled "r/Olympia," to which a contributor (identified as "the poneychief") posted a thread titled *Underground tunnels downtown?* in March 2019. A question was posed: "I recently heard about a bunch of underground tunnels downtown and that there was a door in the basement of the urban onion but I'm pretty sure that door is chained so I can't get in that way is there any other way I can get to these tunnels?"[4]

Somewhat later, "cascadewrench" posted to the thread: "I've heard the same rumors 15+ years ago and I can verify most of them except any tunnels existing. The door you're referring to is an old coal chute for when the boiler for the building was coal-fired, but the 'tunnels' are just [a] crawlspace that's occupies part of the basement for utilities. It's basically a pipe chase for the hotel and the retail stores on Washington."

Shortly thereafter, "Willow Rose225" chimed in: "Could they maybe be talking about that old prohibition tunnel between [the] spar [restaurant] and the bank?" To that query, "cascadewrench" replied: "I've never heard of the 'prohibition tunnel' going to the bank from the Spar, I have heard that it used to run to the old state capitol building by Sylvester Park though. What's under the Spar is their artesian well room . . ."

Approximately one month later, posting on the thread returned to the topic of tunnels under the Urban Onion Restaurant. "tgold8888" posted: "Yes the old underground city. About 7 stories down and the elevator at the

Herb & [*sic*] Onion had a down button. Knew a guy named Sage that went down there. Had Shops, Storefronts even sidewalks."

A Tunnel in Centralia

Although Centralia, Washington is not within Thurston County, a tunnel reportedly located there illustrates how some stories about a secret passage might have originated. Nancy Bartley, a *Seattle Times* staff reporter, submitted a December 5, 2002 article about Centralia and McMenamin's Olympic Club, a restaurant, bar, and hotel located at 112 North Tower Avenue. In her article, Bartley quoted Kenneth Moore, "the manager at the vintage, red-brick Union Station where the Amtrak from Seattle stops": "During Prohibition there was a tunnel running from the hotel, beneath the tracks, to a house on the other side. They were running hooch through there . . . When they put in the new platform, they found a body."[5]

The Ellensburg *Daily Record* published an article by Pat Muir, "Centralia Turns Downtown Around," on November 11, 2004. The author mentioned: "Among the city's main attractions are the refurbished Olympic Club hotel on Tower Avenue, a McMenamin Brothers property; . . . For instance, the Olympic Club has a trapdoor leading to underground tunnels . . ."[6]

Brittany Walker is the current property manager for the Olympic Club. She kindly provided a tour of the premises. Figures 3 A and B show the trapdoor

Figures 3 A, 3 B, and 4. Trapdoor, stairs, and coal chute in McMenamin's Olympic Club, Centralia. All photos by author, July 2019.

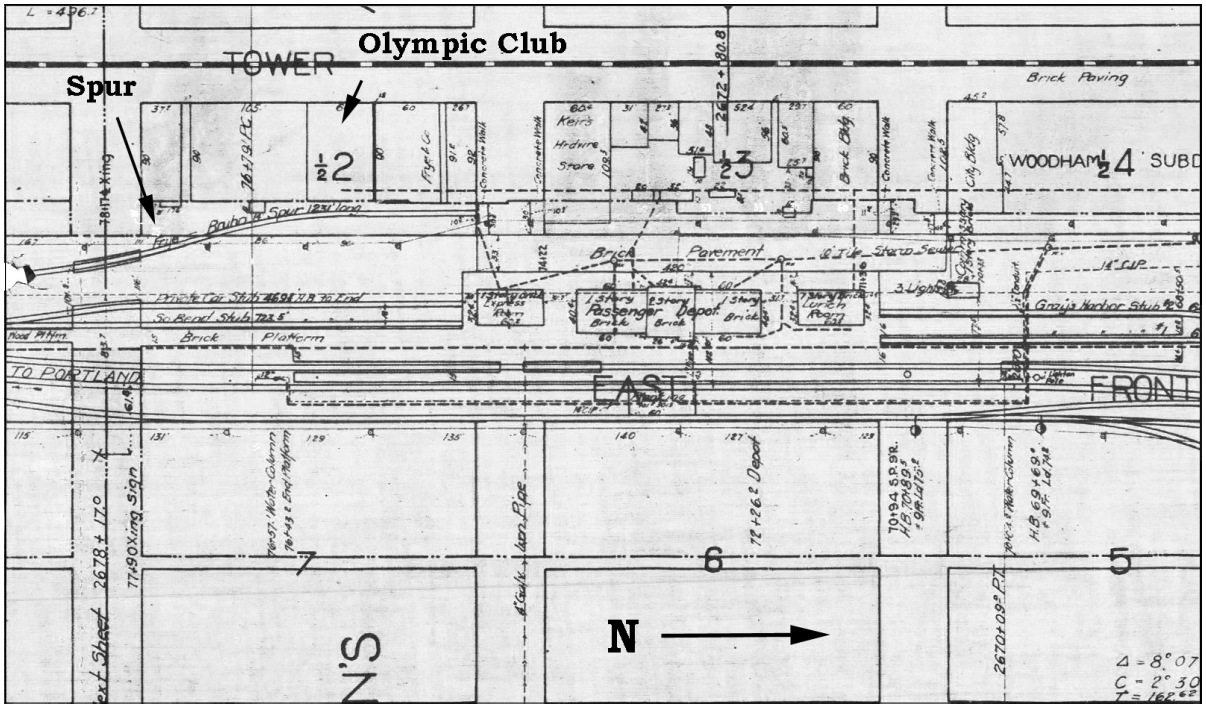


Figure 5. Railroad Valuation map, Station Map Tracks & Structures, Centralia, Lewis County, Washington, Northern Pacific Railway, Tacoma Division, Main Line, Office of Chief Engineer, St. Paul, Minnesota, (V-6/ST&S 7a), June 30, 1917. Washington State Archives.

in the northeast corner of the pool room. Descending the steps under the trapdoor, we entered a space about ten feet wide and twelve feet long. At one end was a rusty stove. The other end, the foundation for the back wall of the building, is seen in Figure 4. A long-unused coal chute is visible. A small amount of light came through a tiny, remaining opening to street level.

Figure 5 bears on the notion of a clandestine tunnel between the Olympic Club and the railroad. Created June 30, 1917, this image is part of a Northern Pacific Railroad Valuation map. At that time, the Frye-Bruhn Spur track lay immediately behind (east of) the structure that currently houses the Olympic Club. The March 19, 1909 issue of Centralia's *The Daily Chronicle* reported that the Frye & Bruhn Company had started construction of a two-story brick building on Tower Avenue, "next to the Home Bakery & Café," which was located at 122 Tower Avenue.[7]

It seems likely that during Prohibition, 100 years ago, the building's coal chute would have been used for any clandestine liquor delivery, rather than a much longer tunnel. On the other hand, with a rail spur so close to

the rear of the Olympic Club, liquor might just as well have been brought in through the back door! At this late date, it is impossible to know precisely what was going on at the rear of the building.

Another Olympia Tunnel— An Urban Legend

With this as background, one of Thurston County's urban legends can be placed in perspective. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines an urban legend as: "an often lurid story or anecdote that is based on hearsay and widely circulated as true."[8] In Olympia, one such story with those characteristics has been around since at least the early 1930s, and perhaps earlier. With minor variations, I have heard it from several sources, over the past couple of years.

Most versions of the tale narrate that a secret passage connects the building at 600 Washington Street, next to Sylvester Park in downtown Olympia, to a tunnel (called the Olympia subway) built about 1891 as part of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Some accounts of the passage hold that it was used by state legislators arriving or departing by train; they were able to avoid inclement weather by using a platform within the tunnel, at the south end of the passage. Sometimes, the passage is said to have been used during Prohibition to bring alcoholic beverages into the Old Capitol Building.

The railroad tunnel, running east and west, lies under 7th Avenue and is three blocks long. It is visible in Figure 6, which is part of a Northern Pacific Railroad Right-of-Way Plat Map. The "Old State Capitol Building" in Block 26 displays an inaccurate representation of that building's floor plan. Purportedly, that structure is where the secret passage originates. The building currently houses the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. However, when built in the early 1890s, it was used as the Thurston County Courthouse. The original structure was purchased by the State of Washington in 1901 and became the state's capitol. Construction of the Annex, immediately to the east, was begun that same year and completed in 1905. The Superintendent of Public Instruction moved into the finished building in 1906. Together, the original building, plus the Annex, is known today as the Old Capitol Building.

The Washington State Archives maintains a rather complete set of early Olympia City Council records. The Council approved Ordinance Number 399 on June 10, 1890. It authorized construction of the 7th Avenue tunnel by the Tacoma, Olympia & Grays Harbor Railroad (a construction railroad controlled by the Northern Pacific). The tunnel was to be 40 feet wide, with timbered walls, and covered with planking such that 7th Avenue, above the tunnel, remained safe for travel by the public. There was no mention of a stairway connecting the tunnel to street level, or a passage from the tunnel into any nearby building.

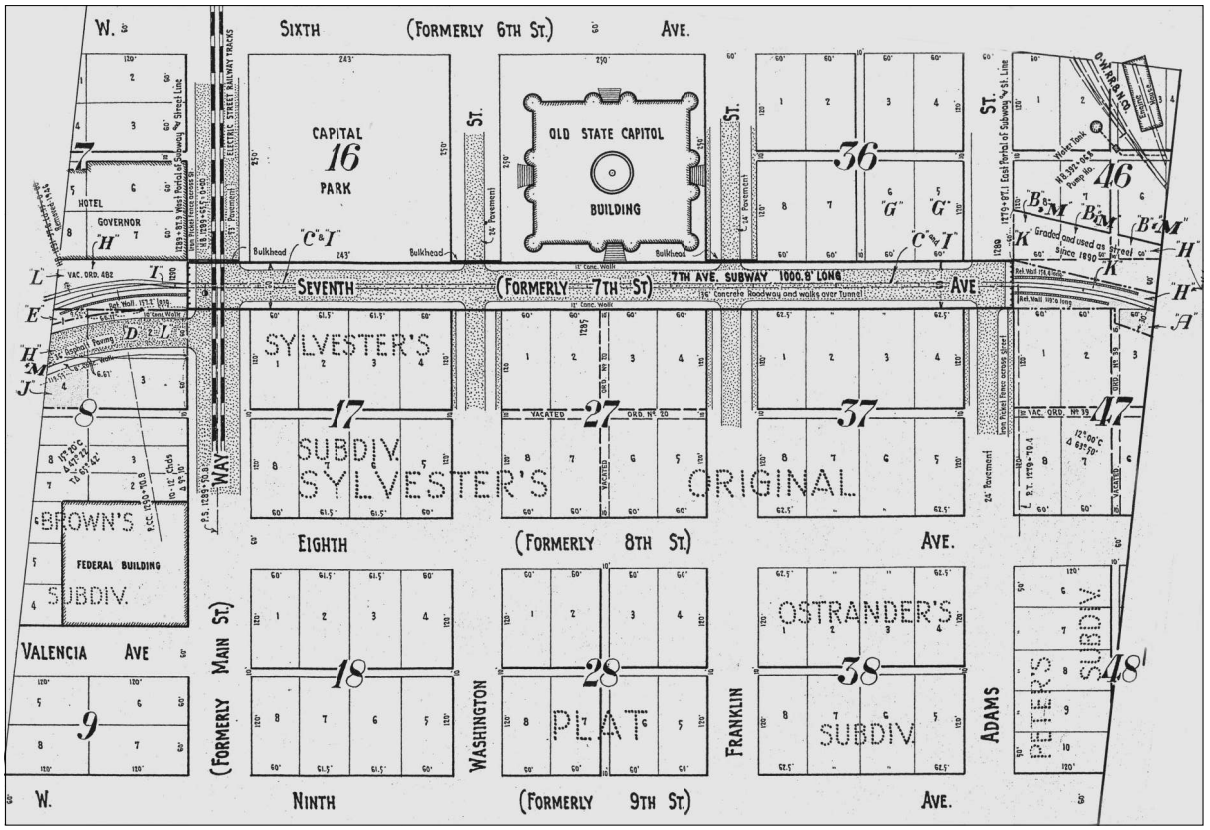
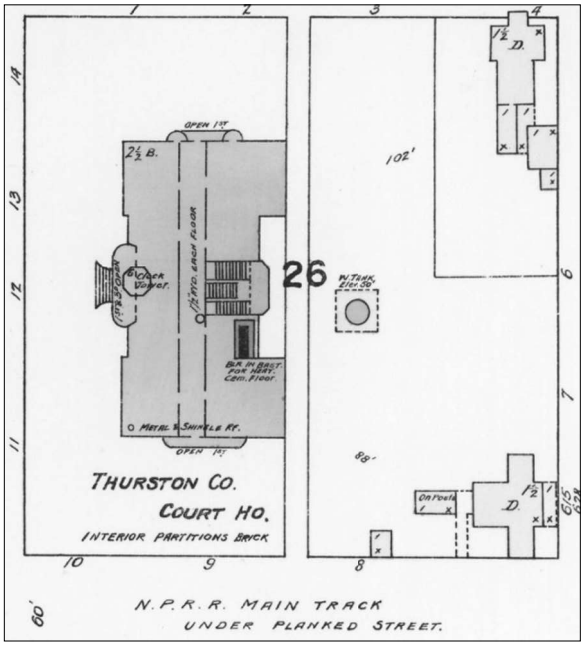
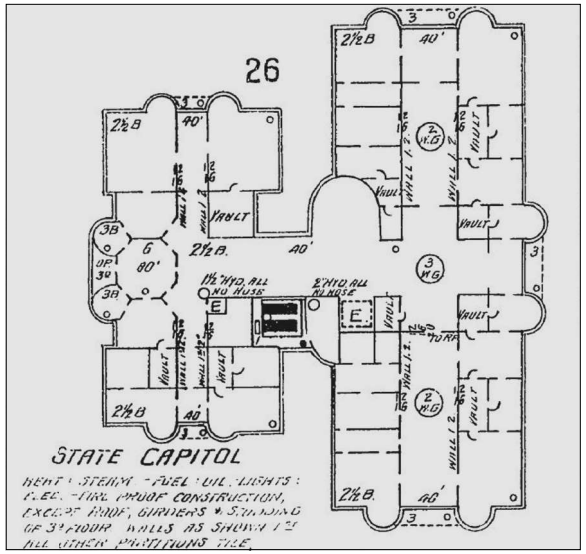


Figure 6. Sheet 39, Right of Way Plat Map, Northern Pacific Railway, Olympia Branch (Lakeview to Gate). Thurston County Assessor.

Ordinance Number 1190 was approved February 8, 1912 by the City Council. It provided for concrete reconstruction of the 7th Avenue tunnel. "Said subway shall be so constructed that its outer walls shall be at the property line on either side of said Seventh Street; said outer walls extending below the surface of the ground sufficient distance to obtain proper foundations, . . . Two inner walls to said subway shall be constructed, one upon either side of the center line of Seventh Street and eight feet distant therefrom when measured at right angles thereto, and the center line of the railroad track to be presently operated by grantee through said subway shall be the same as the center line of said Seventh Street." Again, neither stairs nor a passage out of the subway was described.

Figure 7 comes from the 1896 Sanborn Fire Map of Olympia. The Thurston County Courthouse occupied the west half of Block 26. The same block, from the 1908 Sanborn map, is visible in Figure 8. The Annex had been added, immediately east of





***Top**: Figure 7. Olympia, Washington, June 1896, Sheet 9.*
***Bottom**: Figure 8. Olympia, Washington, August 1908, Sheet 8.*
Both images from Digital Sanborn Maps 1867-1970, Timberland Regional Library, http://sanborn.umi.com.ez.trl.org/splash.html.

the original courthouse building. Figure 9 is a 1901 photograph presented courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society. The view is toward the southeast, at the groundbreaking ceremony for the Annex. The large stone structure is the back (east) side of the former Thurston County Courthouse. On the far left is the slightly elevated, wood-planked roadway of 7th Avenue; beneath that roadway was the Northern Pacific Railroad subway.

Brian Ferris is a long-time Olympia resident who has a continuing interest in local railroad history. Via email,[9] he informed me of a story his mother told him many years ago. "I remember my mother telling me that as a young girl (late 1920s - early 1930s) she rode the NP from Aberdeen to Olympia, to visit her grandmother, who lived near the east portal of the 7th Avenue tunnel. She recalled hearing that there was a station inside the tunnel, which the legislators had previously used to come to Olympia. I think she said it was boarded up and no longer used at that time, which would make sense if the 'new' capital was finished in the late '20s." It was not clear to Ferris whether she had personally seen something noteworthy in the tunnel, or had merely been told about it by other family members.

Jim Sabol wrote the following to me in a recent email:[10] "My uncle (Bill Hiblar[11]) worked in the old state capitol building and, while I was visiting him sometime in the late 1970s, asked if I would like to see something about railroading, which he knew I was in-

terested in. 'Sure!' So he took me down to the basement and showed me where the access to the NP train 'platform' penetrated the south wall of the building. By that time, it was covered over-I can't remember with what-as much as possible to make it look as if there were no opening. My shaky recollection is that the portal/access might have been eight to ten feet wide. I have never been inside the tunnel. My use of the word 'platform' is pure guesswork-it must have been just a minimal something on which to step off. Probably an extension of the foundation itself."

Figure 9. Breaking Ground for Annex to Old State Capitol Building, 1901. *Catalog ID Number: C1958.181X.1, Washington State Historical Society.*

I talked personally with Bill Hiblar on July 10, 2019. He retired as State Supervisor of Traffic Safety Programs and is now about 90 years of age. His recollection is that he never went into the passage, from within the building, for it appeared to be closed off by the time he worked there. Curiosity did lead him to enter the railroad tunnel once. While there, a feature was observed which led him to conclude that it represented the remnant of a platform, on the north side of the single track passing through the tunnel.

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to look through the personal archive preserved by Jim Frederickson at his Tacoma home. He was a Northern Pacific Railroad telegrapher during his entire working career, beginning about 1940. When that railroad was merged into the Burlington Northern Railroad in 1970, most of the older Northern Pacific records at Tacoma were simply tossed into a dumpster. Fortunately, Jim retrieved them. Those documents now reside at the Pacific Northwest Railroad Archive in Burien, Washington. Unfortunately, very few of the Thurston County records from the period before 1900 have been preserved, and the 1891 Northern Pacific construction records for the 7th Avenue tunnel have not been located. Thus, if a stairway had connected the interior of the tunnel with the street above (now 7th Avenue, pre-

***Top**: Figure 10. East portal of 7th Avenue Tunnel.*
***Bottom**: Figure 11. West portal of 7th Avenue Tunnel.*
Both photos by author, July 2019.

viously called 7th Street), a record of such might no longer exist. Certainly, a stairway was not present after the tunnel was rebuilt during 1913 and 1914.

Current inspection of the east and west tunnel portals reveals that the subway was designed to allow later expansion, so that it could accommodate up to three tracks, although no more than one was ever operated. Figure 10 is a 2019 view of the east portal, while Figure 11 depicts the west portal. Nowadays, there is no connection between the space carrying the existing track and the galleries on either side of it. Moreover, all entry to the side galleries has been sealed off, at the east and west portals. Gregory Wright, the recently retired Chief of the Olympia Fire Department, wrote me via email:[12] "I have been in the tunnel in question, but under fire conditions, so I would not say that I have done a complete inspection. Unfortunately, now the tunnel is not very safe due to homeless people and the side tunnels are blocked off because of the homeless starting fires."

In a subsequent email, Wright wrote: "The south side (gallery) was closed off earlier, probably after 2000. The north side, more recently, maybe 2015." He added that, before the galleries were sealed off, the fire department would often be called in there every few months. His recollection is that those fires were burning in items brought in by transients, not in wooden material left over from when the tunnel was constructed. Most of the fires he attended were in the gallery on the north side of the tunnel (which remained accessible for many years after the one on the south side was sealed). Wright never saw anything in the tunnel that was consistent with a railroad platform or a passage leading toward the Old Capitol Building.

The subway tunnel under 7th Avenue

***Above**: Figure 12.* Olympia Subway, September 16, 1913. *Catalog ID Number C1984.3.1.*
***Right**: Figure 13.* Olympia Subway, November 12, 1913. *Catalog ID Number C1984.3.2.*
Both photographs courtesy of Washington State Historical Society.

and the roadway above it were rebuilt during 1913 and 1914. Figures 12 and 13 appear thanks to the Washington State Historical Society. Figure 12 is dated September 16, 1913. The view is toward the east, from the approximate position (in 2019) of the parking area immediately south of the firm doing business as Olympia Supply. In the image, an inclined trestle is visible. It probably allowed tracked carts to deliver building materials, including concrete, to the work site. Made about two months later, Figure 13 is a November 12, 1913 image which looks in the same direction; it was obtained closer to the west portal of the tunnel.

Paving of 7th Avenue, over the subway, was completed in 1914.

If the Northern Pacific Railroad had had a passenger train station stop

within the 7th Avenue tunnel, even if it were only used seasonally, it should have appeared on periodic timetables issued by the railroad, one or two times per year. Figure 14 is a representative timetable dated January 10, 1915. It comes from the collection of Jim Frederickson. Neither it, nor any of the other timetables dated between 1900 and 1919, contain a reference to a stop within the tunnel.

Special rules for each subdivision were also included in each timetable. Rules appearing in the November 11, 1923 timetable are similar to those preceding it. *SPECIAL INSTRUCTIONS-Second Subdivision (Grays Harbor Line)* specifies, in detail, how traffic through the Olympia subway tunnel was controlled: "At Olympia-Tunnel district is protected by automatic electric disc signals located as follows: No. 1 (large disc) just west of passenger station. No. 2 (large disc) just east of passenger station. No. 3 (switch indicator) at east end of passing track. No. 4 (large disc) just east of tunnel. Eastward trains or engines finding signals 1 or 2 at stop will protect against westward trains coming out of tunnel. Signal No. 3 will govern eastward movement from passing track. Trains or engines coming from Jefferson Street line must have clear indication from signal No. 4 before opening main track switch."[13] Clearly, there were no special instructions for passenger trains stopped inside the tunnel.

Marygrace Goddu is Olympia's Historic Preservation Officer and a Senior Planner in the Community Planning

Water, Fuel, Scales, Turn Tables and Wyes	Station Numbers	Distance from St. Clair	Time Table No. 41B Succeeding No. 41A January 10, 1915 STATIONS Telegraph Offices and Calls	Car Capacity of Sidings
	C S 28	0.0	SR.....ST. CLAIR.....D 2.8	50
	C K 18	2.8	.....UNION MILL..... 1.5	Spur
	C K 20	4.3	.....LACEY.....P 5.0	40
W T	C K 25	9.3	OY.....OLYMPIA.....D 0.7	110
		10.0	TUMWATER BRANCH CROS. Trk Conn. 4.7	
	C K 30	14.7	.....BELMORE.....P 3.5	40
	C K 34	18.2	.....OVERTON..... 3.0	Spur 7
	C K 37	21.2	RK.....LITTLE ROCK.....D 1.3	43
		22.5	...BORDEAUX JUNCTION... 1.9	Spur 50
	C K 40	24.4	.....MIMA..... 4.5	13
W Y	C K 44	28.9	HK.....GATE.....D 4.9	50

Figure 14. Tacoma Division Timetable 41B, *page 5, January 10, 1915, Northern Pacific Railway Company, currently archived at the Pacific Northwest Railroad Archive, 425 SW 153rd Street, Burien, Washington.*

and Development Department. She previously worked as the Cultural Resources Manager for the State Capitol Campus, and in that role worked on various projects related to preservation of the Old Capitol Building, including projects to halt water intrusion at the building's foundations, on the east (7th Avenue) side. While she will not rule out the possibility of something yet undocumented having existed there, her personal inspections of the building's interior foundation walls never revealed any feature

suggestive of a secret passage heading toward the 7th Avenue tunnel.[14]

Results of the last major inspection of the Old Capitol Building were released by the consultant, Peter Meijer Architect, PC in March 2015. The full report runs to 122 pages and is exceedingly thorough. Special attention was given to the building's foundation footings in view of continuing problems with water intrusion. Drainage systems were examined using fiber optic video camera technology. A diagram of the results appears in Figure 15.

If a secret passage ever existed, it almost certainly would have to have been under the steps on the south side of the Annex. The Washington

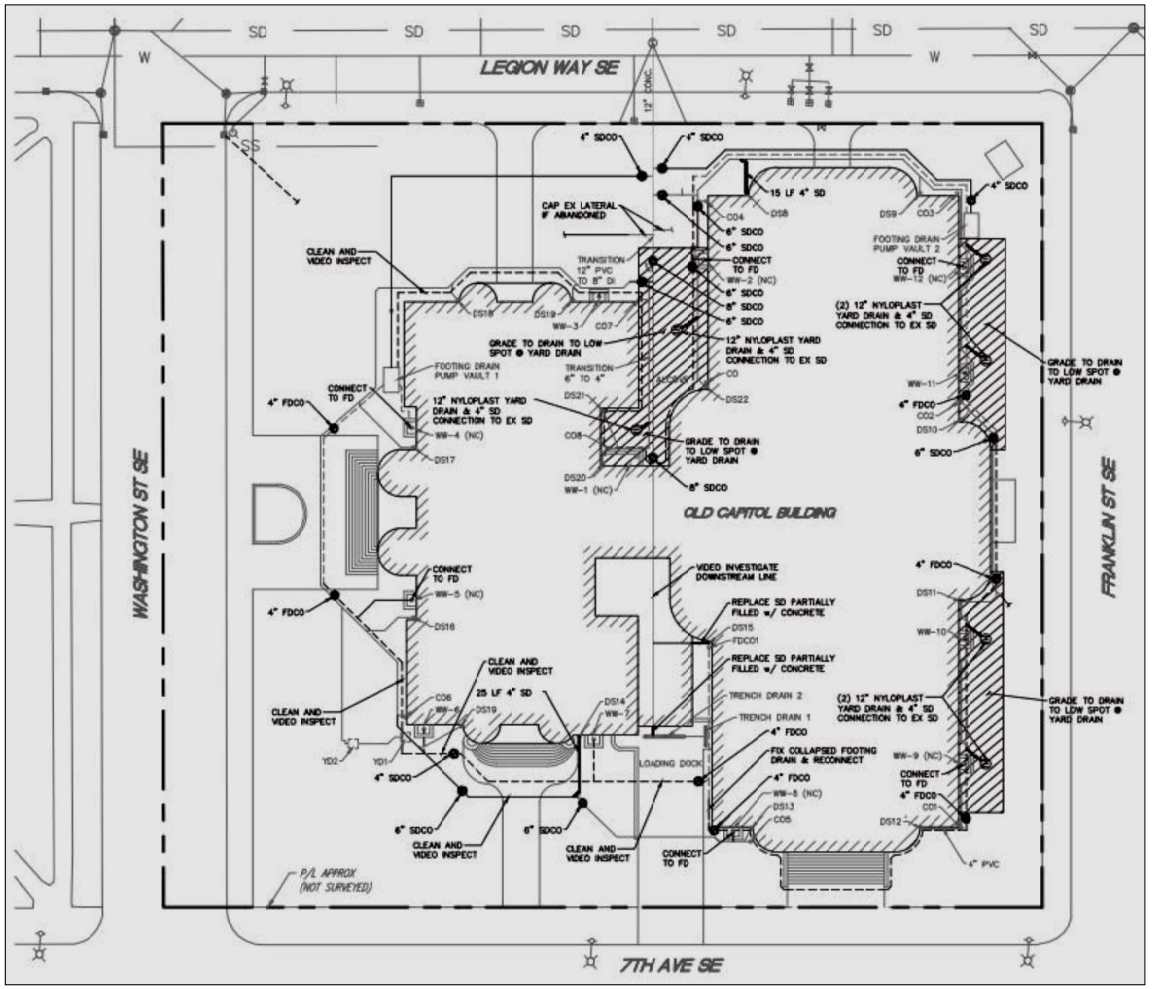

LEGION WAY SE
WASHINGTON ST SE
FRANKLIN ST SE
7TH AVE SE
OLD CAPITOL BUILDING
SD
W
SS
CAP EX LATERAL IF ABANDONED
CLEAN AND VIDEO INSPECT
GRADE TO DRAIN TO LOW SPOT ● YARD DRAIN
12" NYLOPLAST YARD DRAIN & 4" SD CONNECTION TO EX SD
(2) 12" NYLOPLAST YARD DRAIN & 4" SD CONNECTION TO EX SD
FOOTING DRAIN PUMP VAULT 1
FOOTING DRAIN PUMP VAULT 2
CONNECT TO FD
VIDEO INVESTIGATE DOWNSTREAM LINE
REPLACE SD PARTIALLY FILLED w/ CONCRETE
25 LF 4" SD
15 LF 4" SD
TRENCH DRAIN 1
TRENCH DRAIN 2
FIX COLLAPSED FOOTING DRAIN & RECONNECT
LOADING DOCK
P/L APPROX (NOT SURVEYED)

Figure 15. Proposed Drainage Infrastructure, Old Capitol Building, LPD Assessment Drawings, Appendix D, Sheet 2. Peter Meijer Architect, PC, April 11, 2014.

State Archives provided the architectural plan used in constructing the Annex foundation. Relevant parts of that plan appear in Figure 16. Figure 17 is a 2019 photograph of those steps, next to 7th Avenue. Figure 18 is an image made within the lowest level of the Annex, in the printing room of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction. The view is south by southwest and shows the wall adjoining the steps.

Conclusion

It remains for the reader to decide, individually, if it is plausible to believe that a now-vanished entrance into the 7th Avenue tunnel existed in the past. If such a secret passage originated from the Old Capitol Building, it has left no record or physical sign that could be discovered in 2019. In a sense, that matters little, for the legend of the passageway has already become part of Olympia's history.

Notes

[1] regalcaller, April 11, 2015, "The Tunnels Beneath TESC Are Real." https://imgur.com/TQM48aS (accessed July 18, 2019).

[2] regalcaller, August 18, 2015, "Map of Tunnels at TESC." https://imgur.com/Nse8q3F (accessed July 7, 2019, noted to have been deleted from website on July 18, 2019).

[3] Information provided by Karen Johnson via email, October 19, 2020.

[4] theponeychief, March 2019, "Underground Tunnels Downtown?" https://www.reddit.com/r/olympia/comments/b61czg/underground_tunnels_downtown/ (accessed July 19, 2019).

[5] Nancy Bartley, "Centralia relives its bawdy past in restored Olympic Club hotel." *Seattle Times*, December 5, 2002.

[6] Pat Muir, "Centralia turns downtown around." Ellensburg, *Daily Record*, November 11, 2004.

[7] "Frye & Bruhn Start to Build." Centralia, *The Daily Chronicle*, March 19, 1909.

[8] "Urban Legend." https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/urban%20legend (accessed July 19, 2019).

[9] Email from Brian Ferris, July 16, 2019.

[10] Email from Jim Sabol, June 2018.

[11] Recollections of Bill Hiblar, relayed to author by Jim Sabol, July 10, 2019.

[12] Email from Gregory Wright, July 8, 2019.

[13] Northern Pacific Railway Company, *Tacoma Division Timetable 50*, November 11, 1923, page 9. Currently archived at the Pacific Northwest Railroad Archive, 425 SW 153rd Street, Burien, Washington.

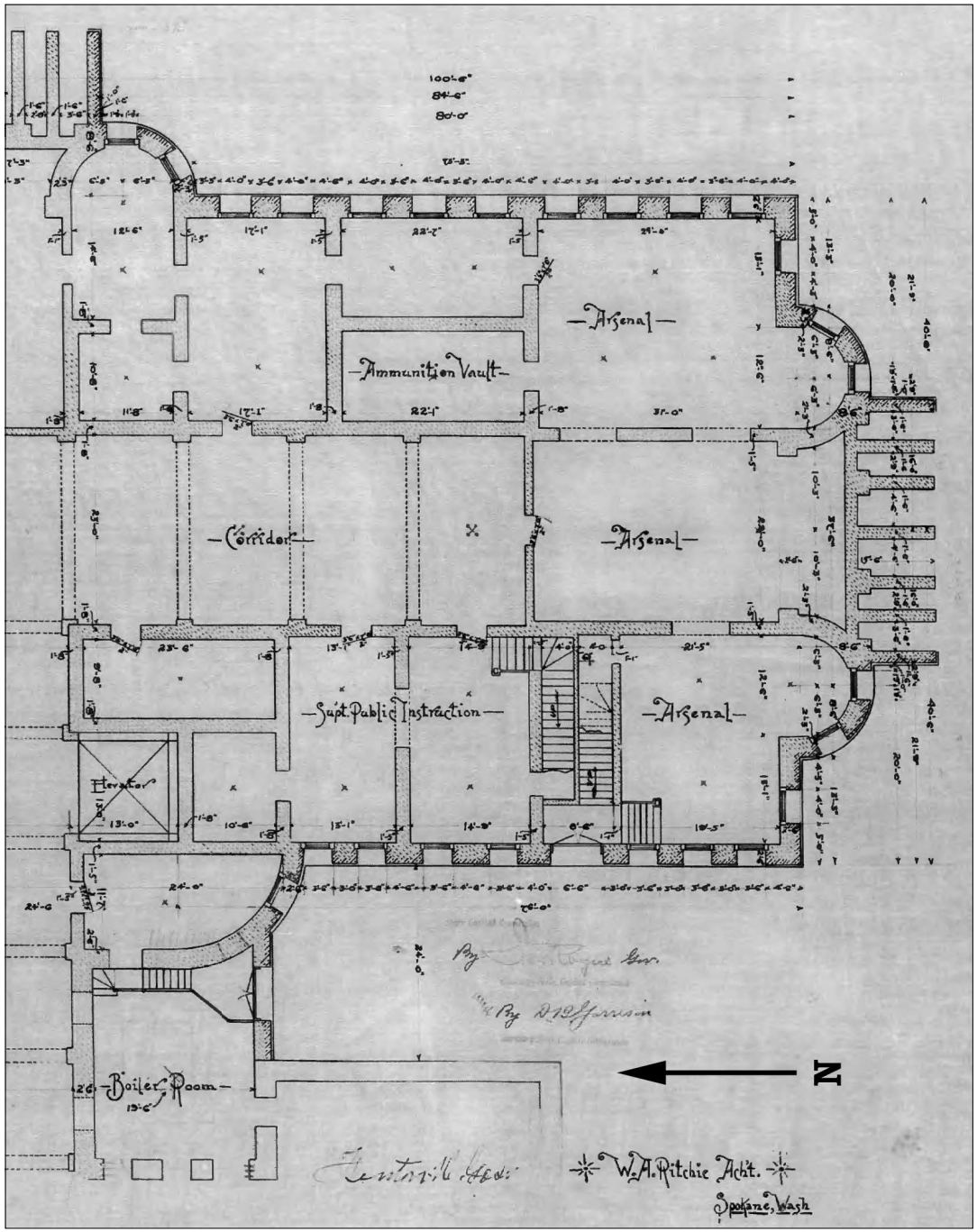


Figure 16. W. A. Ritchie, Architect, Basement Floor Plan of Annex to the State Capitol Building, *Olympia, Washington, Washington State Archives, Olympia, Washington.*

***Top**: Figure 17. View northeast, from 7th Avenue, toward steps on south side of Old Capitol Building Annex.*

***Bottom**: Figure 18. View northeast from printing office of the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, south end of lowest level, Old Capitol Building Annex.*

Both photographs by author, July 2019.

[14] Telephone conversation with Marygrace Goddu, June 2019.

Dr. Hannum is a retired physician and surgeon who spent his early years in Michigan. He arrived in western Washington in 1971 as a member of the U.S. Public Health Service. Railroad history has been a life-long interest, and he has written several books on the subject.